

Highland Dancing

Scottish Highland dancing is one of the oldest forms of folk dance. Dating back to the 11th or 12th century, the Highland Dances of Scotland tended to be highly athletic male celebratory dances of triumph or joy, or warrior dances performed over swords and spiked shield. According to tradition, the old kings and chiefs of Scotland used the Highland Games as a way of choosing the best men for their retinue and men at arms. Highland dancing was one of the various ways men were tested for strength, stamina, accuracy, and agility. The Scottish military regiments used to use Highland dancing as a form of training to develop stamina and agility, but this has become less common these days. Competitive Highland dancing started during the Highland revival of Victorian Britain, and was for men only. Ladies began competing only at the turn of the century. Over the centuries the dancing style has become more refined and now shares many elements from classical ballet. Although historically Highland dancing was restricted to men, today it is mostly performed by females. No matter who dances them, Highland dances require both stamina and artistic skill.

The Highland dances



The Highland Fling

This is the oldest of the traditional dances of Scotland and is a dance of joy performed at the end of a victorious battle. It was danced by male warriors over a small round shield, called a "targe". Most targes had a sharp spike of steel projecting from the center, so dancers learned early to move with great skill and dexterity. The Highland Fling is danced on the spot, and is said to be based on the antics of a stag on a hillside; the grouped fingers and upheld arms representing the antlers.



The Sword Dance (Gillie Challum)

It is probable that the tune, "Gillie Challum", dates back to the days of Malcolm Canmore (Shakespeare's MacBeth). The earliest references to the *dance* are from the 19th century, and it is unlikely that it is very much older. One story is that this was a dance of victory, as the King danced over his bloody claymore (the two-handed broad sword of Scotland) and the even bloodier head of his enemy. Some say that no severed head was used and that the King danced over his own sword crossed over the sword of his enemy. Another story is that the Sword Dance was danced prior to a battle. To kick the swords was considered a bad omen for the impending battle, and the soldier would expect to be wounded. If many of the soldiers kicked their swords the chieftain of the clan would expect to lose the battle.

The Seann Truibhas

Pronounced "shawn trows", this Gaelic phrase means "old trousers". This dance is reputed to date from the rebellion of 1745 when Bonnie Prince Charlie challenged the might of England at Culloden, and lost. As a penalty, Highlanders were forbidden to wear the kilt. Seann Truibhas is a dance of celebration developed in response to the Proscription Repeal which restored to the Scots the right to wear their kilts and play the bagpipes once more. The movements of this dance clearly depict the legs defiantly shaking and shedding the hated trousers and returning to the freedom of the kilt. Some of the steps originate from hard shoe dancing.

It is likely that the kicking-off-of-the-trousers bit was retro-fitted to the dance much like the bloody-swords-and-head thing with the Sword Dance. The Seann Truibhas arrived at its present form in the early 20th century, and an itinerant dance teacher from the 1890s is on record as having invented the first step of the Seann Truibhas. See Fleet & Fleet. -- It does not come as a big surprise that some of the steps in the San Truibhas 'come from hard shoe dancing', since that is what people would have worn for dancing in the old days, anyway (if they wore anything). Before the RSCDS, the modern ghillie pumps were only used by competing Highland dancers at Games, and even now there is a certain renaissance of the hard shoe.

The Strathspey and Highland Reel

Of all the Highland Dancing events in which the competitors vie, the reels are the closest approach to social dancing. Even these, however, are individual competitions. While the teams consist of four dancers, the judges mark each competitor individually. Legend has it the reel originated with well wishers waiting for the minister to arrive at the church for a wedding on a cold day. The chilly group danced as a means of keeping warm.